The first US troops in Soissons station, February 4, 1918. Fonds Valois - BDC

The Americans from the Chemin des Dames to the Marne
In a sense, German and allied strategists they only had to arrive to transform diffi-
nightmare was about to be over and that
Their words convey the feeling that the
unpreparedness and lack of equipment,
pons… but they felt things differently.
the same wounds inflicted by the same wea-
in the same trenches as other soldiers,
1917, two years and eight months after
America’s entry into WORLD I

Psychology and numbers

In the months preceding America’s entry into WW1, the prospec-
involvement of American soldiers in the fighting on French
soil greatly influenced the calculations of German and Allied
strategists alike. Though it was inexperienced and faced organi-
zational problems, the American Army numbered 200,000 men
and its troops were fresh, unlike war-weary allied forces who had
been fighting for three years already and had experienced the
horrors of trench warfare. American support was then crucial
and likely to influence the outcome of the war.

If numbers were so important, how to count ?

American ships in the first months of 1917
that the USA could not avoid entering the
war, there were a central Army Staff and
national army officers able to implement
such effort but there were inevitable blun-
ders due to lack of coordination and to
the new conditions of organization and
recruitment.

Besides, American officers ignored some
of the lessons of the ongoing war that
would seem obvious to us. In professional
newspapers they argued in favor of offen-
sive actions and showed scorn for defen-
sive positions.
The Americans then entered the conflict
without having totally solved their organi-
zational problems and with a preference
for offensive tactics, though they had led
to the disasters on the Somme in 1916
and on the Chemin des Dames in 1917.
But they joined the warfare in order to
drive the Germans out of France and
their shared interests and alliance with
the French explain their preference for
offensive tactics.

If numbers were so important, how to count?

- Was a German soldier better than an American soldier? The French
angrified over the matter and the Ger-
mans, arrogantly, expressed some scorn
for American soldiers. However the ac-
tions of American units on the Chemin
des Dames showed the Germans that
they could not underestimate the Ameri-
cans and that the psychological element
confirmed the mathematical element.
While taking the organizational problems
and useless losses into account, allied
forces and adversaries alike were bound
to acknowledge sheer gallantry, a quality
that had become rare in the other armies
so late in the war. American numerical
superiority was a decisive advantage for
the allied forces in the outcome of the war.

In March 1918, the 26th Division was in
charge of a sector close to the Chemin des
Dames. Like the 1st, 2nd and 42nd Divisions,
the 26th spent the winter of 1917-1918 in
“quiet” sectors so as to be trained by the
French. Recruited in the New England
States, the “Yankee Division”, as it was
nicknamed, was proud of its achieve-
ments in the American Revolution and the
War for Independence. The troops arrived
in France in the fall of 1917 and hit the
road before they had received their mar-
cbing orders, an initiative Pershing did
not much like. The commander of the 26th,
General Clarence R. Edwards, nicknamed
“Daddy” by his men, had a reputation for
lack of discipline and for being often at
odds with his superiors. How such a unit
would perform on the field was of almost
interest to Allied and German strategists.

The Germans soon put it to the test with
two raids in Bois-Briot. The Yankees gal-
lantly fought hand-to-hand and cleverly
used their artillery, which led the Germans
to put end to the hostilities on April 10
after taking one prisoner and losing 60
men. The French showed their appreciation
by giving decorations to 117 men and offi-
cers. The Germans put the Division to the
test again further east, on 20 April. Better
prepared with artillery and elite soldiers,
the attack decimated two American com-
panies whose men “fell dead in their ranks
out of the trenches”.

America’s entry into WORLD I

In the spring of 1917, two years and eight months after
the fighting had begun, American troops
did not make it to the front lines until the
winter of 1917-1918 and did not engage
in major actions until the spring of 1918.
The time lag explains why American sol-
diers’ memories and interpretations of
WW1 are different from other soldiers’.
American soldiers lived in the same mud
in the same trenches as other soldiers,
smelled the same smells, suffered the
same wounds inflicted by the same wea-
ons… but they felt things differently.

Despite the incompetence of some offi-
cers who did not have time to assimilate
the rules of trench warfare, despite their
unpreparedness and lack of equipment,
their testimonies tend to be positive.
Their words convey the feeling that the
nightmare was about to be over and that
they only had to arrive to transform dif-
culties into victory and peace treaties.

In a sense, German and allied strategists

Marks WEGS, in 1912. De guerre issue, Bdeg.de
The walls of the quarries still retain traces of the passage of 20,000 American soldiers who came to the plateau to get acquainted with trench warfare.

From February 1918 onward, the different units of the Yankee Division were moved to a sector encompassing Pinon forest and Braye-en-Laonnois, on a three-day rota basis: reserve in the Aisne valley, support in Vailly, first line on the Chemin des Dames. Troops took shelter in the quarries that had been recaptured the previous year: Froidmont, Rouge-Maison, Le Panthéon, Montparnasse. Section after section, company after company, the different units of the 26th, supervised by French troops (64th RI in Braye-en-Laonnois), got acquainted with the harsh realities of trench warfare. The sector was comparatively quiet but things began to change. The Germans soon wanted to show the newcomers that life would not be so easy. Signs bearing the words “Welcome to the 26th!” even appeared in the German trenches. On February 5 at 3.45 p.m., the first shot at the Germans was fired by the 101st Field Artillery regiment. The casing of the first shell is kept to this day in Massachusetts as a memento.

There was no major offensive during their stay on the plateau but the Americans got acquainted with all aspects of the war, from the search for cantonment areas at the rear to the ceaseless movements and those behind the front lines under heavy shelling. They had to keep the sectors they had been assigned, carry out reconnaissances missions through No Man’s Land with French comrades, launch raids and counterattacks. From March 18 to March 21, the 26th Division left the Chemin des Dames to go to the Toul sector. The men had spent 46 days on the plateau with equipment that was ill-suited to winter conditions. In all the quarries, always located very close to the front line, the Sammies carved and drew into and on the limestone. Those patriotic, religious or cultural traces are visible to this day.

The 26th Division came back to the Aisne area to take part in the Château-Thierry counter-offensive in June and July. General Jean Degoutte, who commanded the 6th French Army, then gave the Division two new nicknames: “Sacrifice Division” and “Saviors of Paris”. During the year 1918 the casualties numbered 13,664: 1,587 killed and more than 12,000 wounded.

The American Battle Monuments Commission. Three of them are located in the Aisne region, in Sony, Seringes-et-Nesles and Belleau.
An American ambulance driver at Dead Man’s Curve

War seen through the eyes of an American Harvard student who graduated in Literature and volunteered in the Ambulance Field Service. In his letters to his parents Paul Cody Bentley, serving in the Chemin des Dames sector in the summer of 1917, described the sleepless nights, the driving of vehicles overloaded with wounded soldiers to hospitals, and the gas. On September 13, 1917 Bentley’s ambulance was hit by a shell south of Craonnelle. Himself wounded, the young man died a few days later in a French hospital.

Paul Cody Bentley in 1917. All rights reserved.

Paul CODY BENTLEY was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on September 22, 1895. His mother was a cousin of Colonel William F. Cody, better known as “Buffalo Bill”. His father was the son of one of the first gold diggers in California.

In 1913, after studying at the University of Chicago, Paul Cody Bentley became a Harvard student and in 1917 graduated in Literature. He was one of the first Harvard students to go through military training and become a corporal in the Harvard Regiment. On April 6, 1917 the USA entered the war. Paul decided to enlist but eye troubles ruined his prospects of a military career.

He then joined the Ambulance Field Service 1 and arrived in France on July 4, 1917, Independence Day. Paul Cody Bentley went to the front on the Chemin des Dames with Section 65, attached to the French 121st Infantry Division.

The duty of ambulance drivers is to fetch wounded soldiers from casualty clearing stations at the back of second line trenches and drive them to hospitals at the rear. On August 6, 1917 Paul Cody Bentley wrote the following letter to his parents:

“Our two last days at the front were undoubtedly the most terrible any of us in this ambulance section will ever experience. I happened to be stationed during most of the time with three other cars at the big tent hospital evacuating the wounded to other more permanent hospitals as fast as they poured in from the post de secours. All the other cars in the section were called to work from the poste de secours. All the other cars in the section were called to work from the poste de secours. Thus, we found that the other cars of our section were on the road, and they would be waiting at the hospital for us to carry another load. Several times we did not have enough to eat our meals, but they often gave us warm coffee at the hospital while the brancardiers were unloading, and we had also been supplied with a ration of sweet chocolate. As a rule a round trip took us three or four hours. It was very weird traveling at night, in particular because we always went without any light and passed endless convoys of every description, cannons, caissons, camions and roulodémements trucks which run on the roads, although propelled like a steam engine. In all these two days I had only two hours sleep, an hour at a time. Once when I woke up I found they had laid a dead man on a stretcher beside mine, less than a yard away, and the stench was horrible.”

“I am still very uncertain as to what I shall do next. But uncertainty is the main characteristic of war. Everything is uncertain. In the first place the section may go on after tomorrow, and it may not. The order has not come yet and we have been expecting it for a week.”

On September 13, 1917 the German artillery launched a gas attack on French lines. Bentley and a partner, Carson Ricks, were ordered to roll five Frenchmen who had been gassed to a hospital in Beaurieux. When their ambulance reached the Dead Man’s Curve south of Craonnelle, the vehicle was hit by a shell. Paul was wounded in a lung. He managed to run the car out of the danger zone then collapsed with exhaustion. Though he had received seven wounds, Ricks carried his friend to a poste de secours. On September 19, 1917, Paul Cody Bentley died in a French hospital. Just before he died he was awarded the Croix de Guerre. His citation runs as follows:

“Since he arrived at the front, he has been noted for his courage. During an evacuation, his car was hit by a shell. Very badly wounded, he continued to drive until his forces were expended.”


The young American civilian, who dreamed of becoming a soldier, now rests in the American cemetery of Serings-et-Nesle, near Feré-en-Tardenois.

1 The American Field Service, a unit of civilians volunteering as ambulance drivers, was founded at the outbreak of the war by Americans living in Paris. From 1914 to 1917, the different units operated on all fronts. When America entered the war, the service was absorbed by the American Army. One of the American ambulance drivers on the Italian front was Ernest Hemingway.
In June 1918, the German Spring offensive threatened Paris. For the first time since the USA entered the war, an American Division comprising Marines and Infantry soldiers was engaged in a major action. The Belleau Wood victory, in a sector located west of Château-Thierry, was hailed as a great success across the Atlantic. It has become a key battle for the United States Marine Corps.


**MAPS** were to show “the wood of the Marine Brigade”. That was what General De-guiche had ordered on June 30, 1918. But they always showed “le Bois de Belleau” or “Belleau Wood”. The order given by the 6th Army commander has been forgotten, but history recalls the role played by the Marine unit in the fierce battle that took place in June 1918 west of Château-Thierry. 

Still at the foot of the Chemin des Dames five days earlier, the Germans reached the Marne River on May 31st. Paris was threatened, French troops were driven back, Château-Thierry fell on June 1st: the situation was alarming. The High Command asked for fresh troops. That is why the 2nd US Infantry Division, that numbered 28,000 men, comprising the 6th Marine Brigade, under the command of General Harbord, and the 3rd Infantry Brigade, took position in Belleau Wood, above the Clignon valley, between Lucy-le-Bocage, south, Bourranches, west, and Belleau, north, to support the French troops fighting the Germans. The Germans had captured the wood and set up their machine guns behind the numerous exposed rocks. On June 3rd, the Von Conta group (4th reserve corps) drove back the French and came into contact with the troops of the 2nd US Infantry Division who stopped them near Lucy le Bocage. After the first engagement, both sides began to organize. The Allied forces wanted to avoid giving the Germans time to reinforce. With the support of French artillery, a unit of the American Army was then to engage in a major operation for the first time. The Germans, whose troops were exhausted and now under-equipped, understood the impact a successful American operation would have on public opinion and on the outcome of the war. The fierce battle in Belleau Wood lasted a month. After fierce fighting on June 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 16, and two failed efforts to capture the wood on June 20 and 21, the Americans were finally victorious on June 25. They held the ground until July, when the 26th Division relieved them. On July 1, the 3rd Brigade of the 2nd US Infantry Division captured Vaux. Machine-guns, hand-to-hand combat, gas attacks... The 2nd US Infantry Division lost 7,876 soldiers and officers in the Belleau Wood battle.

**THE JUNE 1918 fighting in Belleau Wood has become a legend for the Marines. To this day, all along the year, Marines and their families visit the American Memorial in Belleau. A large number of Marines of the 4th Brigade are laid in the cemetery. With soldiers of the 2nd US Division, they played a decisive role in the fierce battle that took place west of Château-Thierry. Their graves are part of the graves of 2,289 American soldiers who lost their lives during the second battle of the Marne. The names of 1,060 soldiers whose bodies were not recovered are etched on the walls of the monument. Soldiers on leave or recovering in Europe and veterans visit the necropolis erected in the wood where the events of June 1918 took place. They all communicate on an equal footing on the site where the events of June 1918 took place. They all commemorate the battle whose recollection brings cohesion to veterans visit the necropolis erected in the wood who played a decisive role in the fierce battle of the Marne. The names of 1,060 soldiers whose bodies were not recovered are etched on the walls of the monument. Soldiers on leave or recovering in Europe and veterans visit the necropolis erected in the wood where the events of June 1918 took place. They all communicate on an equal footing on the site where the events of June 1918 took place. They all commemorate the battle whose recollection brings cohesion to the Corps and enhances its prestige. Retiring soldiers love leaving with star-spangled banners that flew in the cemetery. In the wood behind the cemetery “the devil dogs” fought their key battle. Not the first one, but the one that forged their reputation. “The action in which they suffered the highest number of fatal casualties”, in the words of David Atkinson, who runs the memorial. This is where the Germans nicknamed them “devil dogs”, as a reference to the kind of dogs that bite and do not let go. A name that in a sense echoes their official motto “semper fidelis” “always faithful”. A retired American officer says: “The history of the Marines began in Belleau. When it took position on the Château-Thierry/Paris road at the end of May 1918, the 4th Marine Brigade, within the 2nd US Infantry Division, was fully aware that it was protecting the capital”. Adding to the importance of the Belleau Wood Battle is the fact that for the first time on such a scale the Germans fought the American avant-garde in France.

This kind of test has deep impact on morale and opinion, whether it ends in defeat or victory. The Marines are remembered as the main if not the only contributors to victory in Belleau Wood. And they fought with the 3rd brigade of the US Divi-sion. “More than any other corps in the United States, the Marines have known how to use the psychological impact of the press, which the rest of the army was unable to do”, says the retired American officer.

The fable of the fountain

It is a fountain on a village property. The Ma-rines going through Belleau have adopted it. If you drink the water, you are supposed to live a year longer. Some soldiers even ask to be presented with their decorations near the fountain. For these soldiers, the place is part and parcel of the aura attached to Belleau. The clear water gushes out of a dog’s head that bears some resemblance to a bulldog. And the bulldog has been a mascot for the Marines since the Germans nicknamed them “Teufelshunden”, “devil dogs”. In fact the dog is a bullmastiff and it has been here since the 19th century. The owner of what was then Belleau Château had brought the ornament back from Germany. In the Belleau Wood battle in June 1918, the Marines took the whole wood but did not reach the village where the fountain is located. It was the 26th Division that a few weeks later liberated Belleau village, discovered the ornament, made of German metal, and drank the water. End of a myth. History does not say how the fountain became part of the lore of the Marines.

The famous fountain where Marines come to drink.

The ornament is not the head of a bulldog but a bullmastiff. In 1930.

The “devil dogs” nickname. It was a term of endearment to the Germans, who nicknamed them “Teufelshunden”, “devil dogs”. This is where they suffered the highest number of fatal casualties. 

The ornament is not the head of a bulldog but a bullmastiff. In 1930.


The ornament, not the head of a bulldog, but a bullmastiff. In 1930.


The ornament, not the head of a bulldog but a bullmastiff. In 1930.

In 2003, on a mission of preventive excavations on the plateau south of Soissons, archeologists exhumed fragments of teeth and bone, and scraps of a boot and wallet. These remains enabled the Pentagon to formally identify Francis Z. Lupo, a soldier of the US 1st Infantry Division, reported missing in action in the second Battle of the Marne.


FRANCIS Z. LUPO. A name among the 1,060 engraved on the Tablets of the Missing in the American memorial in Belleau. Until 2003, it was the only trace remaining, with some information about his unit and the fighting it was involved in. Lupo, 18th R.I., US 1st Infantry Division, fell on July 21, 1918 during the American counteroffensive in the Soissons area. He was 23 and a native of Cincinnati, Ohio. His body was not found and he was reported "missing in action." After the war, his mother Anna Lupo traveled to Belleau, a journey that did nothing to assuage her grief, and went back home, having only seen this endless list of missing soldiers. But 88 years later, in 2006, Rachel Kleisinger, 73, a niece of Francis Z. Lupo, was informed that the remains of her uncle had been formally identified by the scientists of the Military Laboratory. “My uncle died 100 years ago and they tell me they have found him? I just could not believe it.” The old lady, incredulous at first, finally believed in a story that seemed to be the stuff of Hollywood fantasy. The DNA had confirmed the pieces of evidence that had been gathered.

Let us go back three years earlier. In July 2003, archeologists carried out excavations in the Poissy sector, not far from Soissons. One of them unearthed fragments of teeth and bone, as well as scraps of a boot and a wallet bearing the name Lupo. The service record of Private Francis Z. Lupo states that he was 5 feet tall, weighed 60 kg and that his shoe-size was 7. The size of the boot was 7.5. The DNA dispelled the doubts that could remain. The remains were those of Private Francis Z. Lupo. The military archives gave another piece of information: when the soldier was reported missing, his unit was fighting in the sector where archeologists operated 85 years later.

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The American cemetery of Seringes-et-Nesles.

Francis Lupo's Grave at Arlington National Cemetery D.C.

Private Lupo IS NO LONGER MISSING

When the USA entered the war, Germany was looking east. Its leaders’ optimism as to the outcome of the conflict was then reinforced by the positive perspectives, on a military and political level, opened up by the first convulsions of the Russian Revolution. Probably underestimating the impact of the American involvement on the evolution of the war, German diplomatic efforts were too tentative and delayed to change the course of the war.


ON APRIL 6, 1917, the American Congress voted the declaration of war on Germany. In Berlin the serenity of the population matched the politicians’. The German Foreign Minister reacted after the declaration that no direct military involvement of the USA was to be expected. As surprising as they now may seem, such reactions deserve some explanation. On the one hand, the context of a degradation of relations between Germany and the United States must be taken into account. On the other hand, they reveal an underestimation of the gravity of the situation, which was to have dire consequences.

At the beginning of the war, the Germans expected the USA to maintain a neutral position. But the realization that Wilson had chosen the Entente soon sobered them. Moreover, submarine warfare launched by the Germans in February 1915 to thwart the British blockade was against the interests of the USA whose ships were regularly sunk.

Unrestricted submarine warfare

The diplomatic crisis culminated with the sinking of the Lusitania on May 7, 1915 that resulted in the deaths of 1,198 people, among whom 128 American civilians. The German leaders were torn between the wish to maintain diplomatic relations with the USA and their reluctance to abandon a weapon that was deemed very effective. Though they refused to endorse responsibility for the disaster, they nevertheless agreed to suspend unrestricted submarine warfare. The issue arose again in 1916, when the Germans realized that war was not about to end soon. In 1917 the Kaiser decided to resume unrestricted submarine warfare, thus allowing the sinking of all ships, be they allied or neutral. In February, President Wilson went before Congress to announce that he had severed diplomatic relations with Germany and in April, the USA declared war on Germany. The American declaration of war was not a surprise in Germany. It was not even considered as a major issue as the ongoing Russian revolution opened up perspectives for peace on the Eastern front and for political reforms that could bolster the war effort. In fact, many Germans did not fear the American involvement in the war, as they believed that it came too late and that a victory of the Central Powers was assured.

Yet, the situation was far from good: submarine warfare had fallen far short of giving the expected results and the troops added to Germany’s strength from the Eastern front had only allowed an offensive which came too late and was foiled in the second battle of the Marne. Meanwhile hundreds of thousands of Americans were arriving in Europe, reinforcing the victorious perspectives of the Allies.

Thus German decisions were marked by excessive optimism, reinforced by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The various German attempts to seek a negotiated peace came too late. A Peace Resolution was passed by the Reichstag in July 1917, at a time when the Americans, who were about to win, had abandoned the idea of a stalemate and preferred to take Wilson’s 14 points as the basis of negotiations to end the war in October 1918. Even though the American troops did not have time to show their full potential, the German lack of knowledge about the real military and diplomatic issues led them to delay the necessary decisions until they had become tragically invalid.
In March 1917 Anne Morgan, Anne Murray Dike and seventeen compatriots arrived in the Aisne region. For seven years those wealthy American ladies put their talents and skills at the service of local populations in need.

“THE WAR is not only military fighting, it is also a struggle for civilians.”

With this in mind, at the end of 1916, within the American Fund for French Wounded, Anne Morgan and Anne Murray Dike founded the Committee for Devastated France (Comité américain pour les régions dévastées) (C.A.R.D.). A few months later, the two women and seventeen American compatriots settled in the remains of the Château de Blérancourt that had been abandoned after the German retreat in March 1917. Their first decision was to put up wooden barracks to serve as office and warehouse. They also built a dispensary, a school and a poultry yard. The aim was not only to give free food but also to help the inhabitants to regain their autonomy.

Of course C.A.R.D. provided assistance, answering the calls for help of families asking for shelter and the bare necessities: “No sooner had their cry for help reached the Committee than a van, driven by young girls, took what was urgently needed. When they had reached their destination, the girls unloaded the van and transported what they had brought into the house. While one of them cleaned the place, the other installed a bed, a stove, lit it and prepared a meal. They did not leave the house until they had set the table, served a hot meal, made the bed, put flowers in a vase and welcomed the tears of gratitude of those poor people,” relates Gaston Héricault in his book Terres assassinées, devant les dévastations. (1934). But the C.A.R.D also aimed to provide training. As early as 1917, girls were taught domestic skills, boys were taught D.I.Y. and in Blérancourt, a gardener taught children to grow vegetables and fruit. Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime...

They took part in the reconstruction

In 1918, Anne Morgan and her compatriots had to flee the German offensive. From Blérancourt to Vic-sur-Aisne, from Vic-sur-Aisne to Coyolles, they had to relocate several times… But wherever they were, despite the nomadic life they had to lead, they carried out their mission, setting up mobile canteens and dispensaries, and organizing the evacuation of villages. After building a new warehouse in Paris in May 1918, they stayed in contact with refugees and set up agricultural cooperatives in Seine-et-Marne and Eure-et-Loir to provide work for the displaced. In the Chateau of Boullay-Thierry (Eure-et-Loir) they took care of numerous children whose parents had been taken prisoner. When war had ended, the American ladies stayed on and took part in the reconstruction in the Soissons area. They set up medical units in Blérancourt and Vic-sur-Aisne. They also took an interest in the teaching of children, contributing to the setting up of 65 schools until March 1920. They also set up libraries and library buses delivering reading materials to villages and hamlets. The C.A.R.D. was dissolved on April 1, 1924. On July 30 of the same year, General Pétain awarded Anne Morgan and Anne Murray Dike the Legion of Honor in the Château de Blérancourt that had by then been turned into a museum... the last achievement of those remarkable ladies.
The frail silhouette of Charlie, discovered by the Parisian public in 1915, reappeared four years later in the uniform of a soldier. *Shoulder Arms – Charlot Soldat* in the French version, is an atypical movie among the various American war films released in France from 1917 onward. With this satirical work of art, combining comedy and tragedy, Charlie Chaplin enabled many real soldiers to identify with a fictional character.

Some situations in the film, in keeping with Chaplin’s comical vein, nevertheless echo the deep anti-German sentiment that was a favorite feature of American propaganda.

**An involuntary volunteer**

Though not refractory, Charlie, almost in the role of himself, resists the fundamentals of military organization. And though he fails to make him conform and toe the line, he never shirks his duty. Like most Doughboys he is hard-pressed to find a way to scratch his back. His humorous way of carrying various utensils that take on an amusing dimension, like the cheese grater he uses to scratch his back. His funnily facial expressions, his hyperactivity, the peculiar way he moves and his extreme vitality come as a kind of provocation when set against the vulnerability of fighting men. The film does not dwell on horror but humorously testifies to the harsh realities of trench warfare: promiscuity, cold, rain, mud, attacks and violence.

One of the most effective episodes in the representation of reality is the delivery of letters, so important for soldiers’ morale. Charlie, who does not receive anything, sneaks behind a comrade to read his letter over his shoulder and intensely reacts to the news he’s being informed for him. This sequence is emblematic of the profound humanity of the filmmaker. The fact that Chaplin himself participated in a dangerous mission, he becomes a hero, just by chance, “like so many others!” in the words of writer Jean-Gaillier Boissière in May 1919.

Excusing the glorifying tone that characterized propaganda at the time, the film nevertheless evokes heroic feats. The association of the two positions is probably one of the reasons why the film was so popular with soldiers. If Chaplin’s comic vein had no equivalent in the French cinema of the time, its irony and derision mirrored the tone of satirical reviews written by artists and soldiers, such as La Balanonette and Le Canard Enchaîné. Charlie’s adventures made spectators forget the pain and suffering they had experienced during the war. The film brilliantly and humorously synthesizes the mixture of small joys tinged with sadness.

When he “involuntarily volunteers” for a dangerous mission, he becomes a hero, just by chance, “like so many others!” in the words of writer Jean-Gaillier Boissière in May 1919.

**The USA: essential but reticent**

When President Wilson came to Paris for peace negotiations in 1919, he did not succeed in imposing his vision of a new diplomacy based on the self-determination of peoples, International Law, and the League of Nations as an organization that could allow nations to find negotiated solutions to their conflicts instead of resorting to arms. Georges Clemenceau, French Premier, and Lloyd George, British Prime Minister, favored other solutions: the balance of powers, the assurance for France to have the upper hand over Germany and the assurance for Britain to renew links with the Empire.

**American disappointment**

The losses suffered by both countries and the necessity to cripple Germany heavily weighed on the calculations of the French and the British who did not much care for the idealism and moralizing stance of Wilson, the President of a country that had come to their assistance, but so late in the war. Wilson went back to the US with a treaty in which sanctions against Germany prevailed over the ideal of peace he had sought even before the entry of his country into war.

American disappointment was general, all the more so as American propaganda during the war had promised reform and democratization of the world order. Yet, except for the provisions relative to the League of Nations, the Treaty of Versailles reflected the old balance-of-power system. Moreover, American conservatives objected to the League of Nations. Henry Cabot Lodge, Senator for Massachusetts and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, spearheaded the attack on the Treaty of Versailles that was never ratified by the United States.

At a time when the USA was becoming a key player, the country, officially at least, distanced itself from the international peacekeeping system.
THE AISNE

We first saw fire on the tragic slopes
Where the flood-tide of France’s early gain,
Big with wrecked promise and abandoned hopes,
Broke in a surf of blood along the Aisne.

The charge her heroes left us, we assumed,
What, dying, they reconquered, we preserved,
In the chill trenches, harried, shelled, entombed,
Winter came down on us, but no man swerved.

Winter came down on us. The low clouds, torn
In the stark branches of the riven pines,
Blurred the white rockets that from dusk till morn
Traced the wide curve of the close-grapping lines.

In rain, and fog that on the withered hill
Froze before dawn, the lurking foe drew down;
Or light snows fell that made forlorn still
The ravaged country and the ruined town;

Or the long clouds would end. Intensely fair,
The winter constellations blazing forth --
Perseus, the Twins, Orion, the Great Bear --
Gleamed on our bayonets pointing to the north.

And the lone sentinel would start and soar
On wings of strong emotion as he knew
That kinship with the stars that only War
Is great enough to lift man’s spirit to.

And ever down the curving front, aglow
With the pale rockets’ intermittent light,
The rumble of far battles in the night, --
Rumors, reverberant, indistinct, remote,
Borne from red fields whose martial names have won
The power to thrill like a far trumpet-note, --

Craonne, before thy cannon-swept plateau,
Where like sere leaves lay strewn September’s dead,
I found for all dear things I forfeited
A recompense I would not now forego.

For that high fellowship was ours then
With those who, championing another’s good,
More than dull Peace or its poor votaries could,
Taught us the dignity of being men.

There we drained deeper the deep cup of life,
And on sublime summits came to learn,
After soft things, the terrible and stern,
After sweet Love, the majesty of Strife;

There where we faced under those frowning heights
The blast that maims, the hurricane that kills;
There where the watchlights on the winter hills
Flickered like balefire through inclement nights;

There where, firm links in the unyielding chain,
Where fell the long-planned blow and fell in vain --
Hearts worthy of the honor and the trial,
We helped to hold the lines along the Aisne.

Alan Seeger (in 1914-1915)

A SHORT CHRONOLOGY

LATE 1914-EARLY 1915 Americans, like the poet Alan Seeger, fight with the 2nd Regiment in the French Foreign Legion.

OCTOBER 1914 Creation of the Commission for Relief in Belgium by Herbert Hoover.

1917

APRIL 6 The USA enters the war.

APRIL Creation of the American Committee for Devastated France (Anne Morgan).

APRIL-JUNE The Franco-American “La Fayette” esquadille is based in Chaudun (Aisne).


JUNE 28 The 1st Infantry Division arrives in Saint-Nazaire.

END OF OCTOBER Gen. John Pershing witnesses the shelling of La Malmaison Fort.

NOVEMBER 2-3 First major American engagement in the Lunéville sector.

1918

FEBRUARY-MARCH The 26th Infantry Division holds the Chavignon-Pargny-Filain sector with the 21st French Infantry Division.

APRIL AND SEPTEMBER Fighting in the Saint-Mihiel salient.

MAY Fighting in the Montdidier sector.

JUNE-JULY Fighting around Château-Thierry.

JUNE Battle of Belleau Wood (near Château-Thierry).

NOVEMBER 11, 1918 Nearly 2 million American troops are in France, within 42 divisions.

JANUARY 8, 1919 Wilson’s 14 points.

1920’S Creation of the Franco-American museum in Blérancourt (Aisne).

1923 Creation of the American Battle Monuments Commission.

1933 Inauguration of Château-Thierry Memorial (Cote 204).

2008 Inauguration of the memorial to the 26th American Division in Froidmont near Bray-en-Laonnois.

2011-2012 Inauguration of the memorial to the 42nd American Division in Fère-en-Tardenois and creation of Croix Rouge Farm Memorial.

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